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# My International Experience and Perceptions of American Culture

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## **IV. My International Experience and Perceptions of American Culture**

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*Blaise Mosengo, Doctoral Student, School of Education and Health Sciences*

I came to UD from Kinshasa, the capital of the Democratic Republic of Congo, one of 54 countries in Africa. The Democratic Republic of Congo includes more than 250 tribes. Two principal values can define the Congolese culture and the cultures of many other countries in Africa: hospitality and attachment to the family. In Congolese cultures, strangers are welcome and given particular care. In fact, being together is of a great value in this cultural environment. There is little room for individualism. We exist first as members of a family or a clan.

The perceptions of many international students about lifestyle in the United States can be summarized by a quest for personal ego. American culture is perceived as an individualistic culture. The “I” and “my” have greater values over the “we” and “our.” Diversity and difference are not as appreciated as sources of communion and strength.

### **My Perception of American Education**

Most countries in Africa apply a traditional type of education. Teachers are seen as holders of knowledge. Likewise, students are simple receptacles that need to be filled with knowledge judged to be external (coming from the teacher). There is not much room for reflection or critical thinking. We learn to memorize lessons rather than to reflect on the content of a lesson.

Besides the high cost, the United States offers a type of education that is well appreciated in many African countries. There is a positive relationship between teacher and learners. Such a relationship allows enough room for dialogue and discussion. This reality helps students to improve their critical thinking skills. Thus, knowledge is a reality constructed and shared in a mutual support between teachers and learners.

### **Some Suggestions for Improvement**

Those who have been to countries other than the U.S. will tell you how different American culture and lifestyle are as compare to the cultures of other countries. Besides the academic demands, added to the need to improve their language proficiency, international students have to deal with these different elements of the culture. Hence, educators should be aware of the

diversity of the student body on campus. This diversity includes the presence of international students. In this sense, we can improve several areas of the campus and education experience, including the following:

- **Textbooks and Curriculum:** Educators should be aware of realities outside of the U.S. and be open to learning from students. This will increase international students' motivation and will likely help domestic students to learn other realities of life (knowledge) that they might ignore.
- **Use of Acronyms or Abbreviations:** In common conversations around campus, there is frequent use of acronyms and abbreviations (e.g. DACA, NFL, NCAA, etc.). Educators and peer students should be mindful of the presence of international students and take time to explain what the used acronym means.
- **Role of Support Services on Campus:** Unlike domestic students, international students are not necessarily used to support services—such as LTC, The Write Place, advising programs, etc.—which might not exist on the campuses of their countries of origin. It is thus important to help them know the existence and necessity of these services for their academic achievement.
- **Teacher/Student Relationships in U.S. versus African Countries:** In Africa, the relationship between students and teachers is a top-down relationship. Therefore, U.S. educators should not expect all international students to come naturally to them or to use productively their office hours. In this sense, it would be helpful if teachers could approach international students and explain to them the importance of the service that they wish to provide. By doing so, international students will not wait until they are in trouble before they can go and meet their teachers or advisers.
- **Stereotypes:** Having a strong accent or struggling with English does not necessarily reflect the cognitive abilities of a person. We should all take advantage of our school as a learning community, thus being open to learn from one another. Stereotypes do not do any good and build walls between us.